

## **Episode 29: Fall Apart**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-nine: Fall Apart.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** Cassian had come across another traveling group of performers, a band, two women on drums and a man with a high, clear voice and a person with a sort of tambourine that they tapped against their hip as they rounded out the man's song with harmonies in a voice much lower than his. Cassian's shoulders had come down, the tension releasing the longer he stayed, and as I came up behind him I slipped my arms around his waist and stood on my toes to rest my chin on his shoulder. My ears burned, half-certain Iolo was watching my action, but I refused to let her have my head. Cassian started as I did, just for a moment, before he realized it was me and wrapped my hands in

his. *Careful, Ilyaas*, he murmured, keeping his voice pitched low to not interrupt the performance. I could feel the words more in his chest, a rumble and an idea, than through the air. *Startle me too badly and I might accidentally stick a sword through your stomach.*

I laughed and swallowed the bit of anxiety that still sat in my own throat. *I'd like to see you try.*

We stood like that until my calves hurt from standing on my toes. As we shuffled, as I leaned back against his chest, I could feel his heart speed up for ten, twelve beats before he finally said -- *Rhia has never had very good taste in women. I worry that she'll find trouble and not realize until she's drowning in it.*

If we hadn't been standing in such a way that my breathing would've betrayed my anxieties, I would've let out such a shaky exhale. After all of that, he didn't suspect Rhia as part of the *Fretim* -- maybe Iolo, but he'd assumed Rhia had no part in it. Just that she thought with her heart, a trait the two of us knew too well and tried to ignore, and had gotten caught in a web without realizing it made her dinner. *Poor Rhia*, it meant. *Someone needs to tell Rhia*, it meant.

Which meant, selfishly, that Cassian hadn't made any connections between Iolo and I, either.

*What do you mean? I hedged. She wasn't very... friendly... but I don't think there's anything wrong with her. As long as she's kind to Rhia.*

*Cassian sighed -- I could feel the huff of the air against my neck. The girl seems -- seems like she has distaste for the kings. For you and I -- for Rhia, and her position, by extension. I simply worry that she's... with the rebels.*

*My heart sunk. Oh. But you don't think Rhia --*

*No. I don't think she would. He shifted, cleared his throat. I've known her too long, I have to believe I've known her heart -- I -- he stopped. Laughed, more to himself, something I again felt more in his chest than in the air. Let's get drunk, Ilyaas.*

*This was a safer road than the path we were walking down. I laughed and spun away from him, throwing a coin to the performers and crossing my arms. Let's. But you promised me sugar scones, first. As many as I could eat.*

*As many as you could eat without throwing up on my boots, he corrected, so I stuck out my tongue at him and followed him into the crowd as the sun set around us, as day turned into gloaming turned into night, only half-dark on account of the festival lights, stretching out the night into a forever-sunset day.*

The longer we wandered, the rowdier the crowd became, I discovered the festival was this:

Pockets of fried dough, doused in powdered sugar and dipped in steaming little cups of a peculiar dark red berry sauce that tasted somewhere between a plum and a raspberry. Cassian showed me how to rip off the bottom of the little brown paper cone you got them in, so you could spill the leftover powdered sugar into your mouth like a pixie stick. It was spiced chocolate drinks you dumped rum and cream into in equal measure, fruits in odd shapes I begged Cassian to buy so I could try, that he laughed at because he'd grown up around them so never thought them strange. But isn't that the best sort of magic? The mundane kind that turns into something bright only after it's pointed out?

Even against the sky fading into night, kites spiraled and flapped. Floating lanterns tied to strings, tethers of tiny human-made starlight, glowed warmly above our heads and soared gaily around. The streets were filled with laughter and warm bodies, jostling by each other with the sort of energy that only comes with joy.

And music, everywhere. This was a festival for poets, after all, and even though I'd nearly gone sick with boredom listening to the poets all day in the castle, there was something different and free about street music. Rowdier.

Cassian dragged me into a tavern to listen.

We found a seat at the bar -- a seat, the rest of the tavern so crowded that there wasn't a second seat to have without charming someone out of it, so Cassian grinned the boy next to my seat out of his own, and I scoffed at his flirtations and big eyes and the triumphant little eyebrow wiggle he shot me as he slid into the now-vacant seat until another boy came along, a poet with a silver tongue, and charmed Cassian back out of his in turn. So, Cassian ended up behind me, leaning against the stool, pressed against my back with an elbow loose on my shoulder as he reached over me to take drinks from the bar and offer shouted laughter to the tavernkeeper, a woman with silver woven into the ends of her dark hair and the beginnings of crow's feet around her eyes. The heat from him was a comfort, and as we laughed messily with the poet that had swindled Cassian his seat, and the boy Cassian had swindled off the same seat before, the world twinkled and glowed with that special sort of haze that comes with knowing you're making heart memories.

The three boys around me took their *traem* like shots and laughed as I sputtered it down. As my head grew hazy and I switched to water, they booed until Cassian charmed the tavernkeeper -- or the three of them did, a group charming, a bard and a prince and a boy-from-somewhere and their not unsubstantial combined wit and grace -- into bringing me a hot

cider - juice, it was hot juice, spiced like autumn and blissfully sobering. Cassian laughed at my low alcohol tolerance until I began to warn I'd keep drinking and throw up on his boots like he'd teased to spite him, so he shut his mouth, watching with a quirked grin as I blew on my cider and dumped cream into it and shoved away the flask the silver-tongued poet pushed at me.

He wrapped an arm loosely around my collar, and I turned my face up to his as another poet began to sing, somewhere behind us in the tavern, as the building thrummed with people pounding on tables as the bard's voice soared over top like a gull over the waves.

*Hmm*, said the voice in my head, a little woozy still, hopped up on sugar and alcohol and the magic of the night. I stared at Cassian, and Cassian stared back, face inches away, and I was just drunk enough to not have the sense to flinch away but stared openly -- *hmmm*.

The boy from somewhere jeered. That was all the sense I needed to come back into myself, nearly throwing my nose into my cider.

It took me several minutes, face half-flushed from drink and half from how close we'd come again to something so odd -- god, I don't want to say the word *kiss*, it's still not any better in my head in my mouth, but there it is -- to realize

that the poet beside us had been, in his own turn, charmed from his seat, that this new boy Cassian was conversing with in hard-to-pick-apart Rhysean was not the silver-tongued boy, but --

Io. From the Far Shore.

His eyes flicked to mine as I recognized him, and he bared his teeth. *Eligida*.

*Snake*, I muttered in English, because he couldn't understand me and I was just disconnected enough to not care that Cassian did.

Cassian shot me a frown, shifting his weight off of my chair and standing tall. Becoming Cassius Rex, prince and prophesied king, not a boy half-drunk on beer and bard songs. Our two compatriots -- the bard and boy -- seemed to sense the shift. The poet put his hand to the arm of the boy and angled his head away, and with a half-joking salute to me, went to go sit closer to the rest of the crowd.

*Why are you here?* I fumbled out in my messy Rhysean.

Io tilted his head. *It's a festival. I'm a poet.*

*Seanoc poeta* -- there's no articles in Rhysean, and it drives me crazy even now that I don't know if he meant it as *I'm the poet* or *I'm a poet*. A poet means *this is a festival, this is where we all are, and this is the tavern I chose to spend my time*.

*The poet means he is the king, and you are the soldier, and so that's why I'm beside you.*

I didn't know how to make him specify -- *no, why are you here, with us, in this bar* -- I was too flustered to figure out how to make that into a sentence in my mind, and before I could piece it out or make Cassian do it for me, I took up again with whatever conversation he and Cassian had been carrying on, smooth and quick and -- I swear -- deliberately complex, near impossible for me to follow.

And I was still a little too far gone in cups and sugar to be polite, to care about pleasing this dangerous boy, so I scooped up my cider glass and stood, wobbly, from my seat. *I'm going to go watch the poets*, I mumbled, already trying to spot the boy and bard we'd made friends with in the crowd, and by that point Cassian was far enough into his conversation, the gears in his head turning on a far different plane than those which concerned themselves with me, that he just nodded, caught my free hand and squeezed it and gave a hasty, heavily accented *don't go too far* before he was back in lilting Rhysean, rapid and rolling.

The poet and the boy welcomed me warmly back into their little group -- they'd made more friends, a girl, this time, with thousands of tiny braids spilling over her shoulders and down her back, a scar high on her cheek and shoulder muscles so



defined that my slightly tipsy bi little heart skipped a beat and wondered how to respectfully tell her how gorgeous she was. I introduced myself in stumbling Rhysean, and she gave me her name back -- Myena -- causing me to realize I'd never found the names of the two boys I'd made friends with, and they introduced themselves -- Castor and Pollux, the latter the poet.

They all seemed to know who I was -- all seemed to know who Cassian was, what it meant that we stood together -- but it phased them little. We were fast friends, friends for the night and nothing more, and there was a frantic sort of longing, frantic sort of energy to that that we all seemed to feel -- *memorize these faces as quick as you can and ask them the thirty six questions, because tonight is the first and last night you'll have the chance.* Myena went to the bar and came back with the same cider I'd been drinking, offered me her glass when I laughed and stumbled out a sentence somewhere along the lines of *my favorite, good choice.* We cheered and jeered with the rest of the bar as poets clambered onto chairs and hopped from table to table, spinning their stories for the patrons and passers-by. We bullied Pollux onto putting on a show of his own, and laughed and pounded on the table as he stood, wobby but true, on a chair he'd swindled and recited a poem, brash and bold, filled with perfect iambs and rhymes and the sweet, pure voice of a true poet. I caught one word in ten, but it seemed to be the story of

a battle and two lovers on opposite sides of the fray -- and when it finished, the crowd shouted their praise, Pollux making a flying leap from the stool where he'd stood as Castor and I caught his arms before he could stumble into any other patrons.

I zoned out of the performances around us, somewhere into it, as Myena and Castor and Pollux cackled their way through teaching me as many Rhysean swears as they could think up, increasingly ridiculous bard taunts that far strayed outside of the realm of casual use by the end of them. Pollux tried to teach us the opening lines of his poem, reaching over and trying to form my mouth into the correct shape of the vowels as I stumbled and giggled and lost my mind, slowly, slowly.

I snapped back into reality as the tavern went near-quiet around me for the first time since Cassian and I had entered. I tensed, my head whipping around, until I spotted -- them. Night-sky dark, tightly coiled hair just above their shoulders. Posture somehow stick-straight and hunched at once -- fiddling with a lyre on a strap across their back. Humming, humming, turning it into a song.

*Leander.*

The odds that we ended up in the same tavern, again, the odds that they were playing -- it was fate. Destiny, prophecy put into motion.

They seemed to be a crowd favorite. The tavern held its breath for one moment, two, as I caught the edges of Cassian's conversation, still at the bar with Io, as in the corners patrons slammed down glasses and chairs slid and footsteps came and receded like waves.

Then -- they began to sing.

And I realized I'd heard the song before.

It was the same one they'd sung at the Eligidanim Traem -- the prophecy song. The one about me -- Cassian -- us -- and *them*. Leander. I could feel it in my soul, a like calling to like. *This was the poet. This was the poet. This was the poet.*

Orpheus and the fates and the muses, every iteration of musicality and loveliness in this world or that. *There will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a king, who will right this broken world.* And I was so lost and I was so enraptured and I turned, wildly, taking in the bar and this moment where the world leaned in to listen and --

Cassian's eyes were fixed on Leander. His mouth hung, half-open, his eyes wide. I'd spent some seventeen-fold more years away from Cassian than I had with him, but he was so *known*, to me, like no one else I'd ever met, and I could put a name to every emotion that flickered across his face as their song continued and the world hung still to create some semblance of balance. Awe and overwhelming joy and that soul-deep ache of

something too great to put name to, the kind of emotion you can't catch as it sits on the tip of your tongue -- the kind that sears the moment into your brain and brands it into your skull, a perfect rendering of bliss. There was all of that, in his eyes, and sadness, too, and -- just for a moment, a second, split across his face -- hurt. And -- fear.

He was a boy caught up in a poet's song. And I thought -- I thought -- he saw what I saw. *Here we are*, I wanted to shout, *soldier and poet and king, Cassian, here we are*, but then the world snapped back into motion and Io was still beside him, laying a hand on Cassian's arm, and Cassian turned back into their conversation.

All the same, though, I leaned into that hope. I knew Cassian, and I knew he saw what I saw. Heard what I heard. As the song ended, I tried to force my way through the crowded bar, trying to make my way to Leander to say -- something wild and improbable, *come with me, please, please let me take you home* -- but it was crowded, and they were a favorite of these rowdy patrons, and Pollux was grabbing my arm and pulling me back before I could get too far as Cassian stood and told me, *Ilyaas, we're leaving*. Io had disappeared, slithered away, and with my wits only half-about me, the next conscious realization I had was when we were outside the tavern and the night air hit my face like a bucket of water.

*The tavern. And the poet*, I said, keeping to Rhysean in an attempt to convince him I was sober enough for rational thought. *We've found them, haven't we?*

*We have*, he responded. Where I was dazed, my voice still halfway somewhere-else, his was firm -- mind always running, always grounded, the wheels in his head clicking away in mechanical order. Logic, logic, logic. *I know what needs to be done.*

And I thought that was it, the end of it -- Leander the poet, to be announced at the Favorite's Feast the next night. Io and his sharp-edged charm could stuff themselves, and we would *work this out*, the soldier, and poet, and king. We would deal with the queen, and I would make Cassian good -- *because he already was*, away from his mother. Away from the queen, away from when he had to step up as Princeling.

I could see the conclusion, blurry as the road to liberation was.

But -- but, but.

Here's the thing about Rhysean: there are no gendered pronouns. Verbs are conjugated by *I, you, they, we, we-not-you, you-all*. There are no gendered pronouns, nouns or adjectives that acquire special endings based on identity.

And so when I said *the poet, we've found them*, I meant English-them, Leander, singular-they. *The poet*, even without an

article, *the* prophesied poet, the one we'd have waited the ages for.

And when Cassian responded *we have*, he thought I was referring to Rhysean-them, English-he -- *Io*. He thought I meant a poet, not *the* poet, a poet he could manipulate and guide as he needed. And in Rhysean, there was no clarification.

But I didn't know that.

And I wouldn't find out until much too late.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at [ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast](https://ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast), where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to read out at the end of the show! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigaillelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album *To Japan*, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://FreeMusicArchive.org). Visit the description of

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